

AUGUST 10, 1972

The Screwworm Eradication Center says the screwworm battle is lost for 1972. I haven't asked the boys here at the ranch to hang up their ropes, but after the official surrender it has been hard to encourage them to continue the attack.

The first symptom that the flies had won was when the battleground was returned to the cavalry. After it became apparent that air support wasn't going to contain the outbreak, the situation became grim.

Horse numbers have increased over the state, yet in the Shortgrass Country the only increase has been in the size of horses' stomachs. And riders as well as the ridden have grown in the midsection. Ten years of no screwworms were simply too easy to condition either party for the hard work that riding the thickets take.

During the era of the steer flies, the scene has changed in other ways, too. Over in San Angelo, you nearly have to find a bootlegger to get the kind of worm medicine you want. At one time, worm medicine was the principle item of trade in the Wool Capital.

I did read that the FDA had lifted their restrictions on pine tar oil. Twenty years ago, pine tar oil was on every surface and subsurface in the Shortgrass Country.

Medicine manufacturers believed that unless a potion would ruin a pair of chaps or crack the leather on a saddle, it wasn't fit to bottle.

The FDA wouldn't have had to gone far to investigate pine tar oil in those days. Folks had enough underneath their fingernails to keep four laboratories busy. I don't know why the drug officials would want to investigate anything as messy as that stuff is. I suspect they are running out of things to investigate.

Without anyone noticing, the cows have changed under the peaceful times. Old cows used to lick the worms from their calves' navels. Now, all they remember to do is to hide their calves and skip the free service.

Range detectives will never earn their badge until they've hunted a baby calf on an August afternoon. You can ride a 300 acre trap until you could draw a map of every ant trail, and you still might overlook the quarry. It's strange that the old sisters can keep a bad habit and lose the only good one they ever had, but that's the way our business works.

Another trait livestock have kept is the ability to get cut up during the screwworm season. We had a jugheaded horse brush against a piece of tin this morning. He barely touched the metal. Jack the Ripper couldn't have made a bigger gash.

Before that place is healed, we'll have eight times his worth invested in medicine. Before he scratched himself, an old boy afoot in the desert wouldn't have given six-bits for him. Now we'll be doctoring him every day.

The screwworm center keeps saying the threat won't be over until frost. As I remember it, frost comes mighty slow on bad screwworm years. If frost is going to save us, why didn't it kill all the flies last winter? Depending on frost is sort of like burning off your ranch to keep the grass fires from starting. Frost had a chance to help us and look what it did.

I looked around at the hombres attending the last calf sale in San Angelo. It isn't hard to understand why the Mission center has decided the screwworm has won. The men my age have probably made the screwworm understand that he was an easy winner from

the start. Most of us would have a tough time standing off an attack by a colony of sugar ants. I hope the center realizes we are the front line troops.

It's the USDA's fault for getting us so spoiled. I bet the next time we have the worms under control, we all try a lot harder to keep them that way.